The White Hat

BY SAX ROHMER

Illustrated by J.C.Coll

"HULLO, Brace," said Paul Harley as his secretary entered. "Some one is making a devil of a row outside."

"This is the offender, Mr. Harley," said Brace, and handed my friend a visiting card.

Glancing at the card, Harley read aloud: "Maj. J. E. P. Ragstaff, Cavalry Club, London."

Meanwhile a loud, harsh voice, which would have been audible in a full gale, was roaring in the lobby. "Nonsense!" I could hear the major shouting. "Balderdash! There's more fuss than if I had asked for an interview with the prime minister!"

Brace's smile developed into a laugh, in which Harley joined. "Admit the major," he said.

Into the study, where Harley and I had been seated quietly smoking, there presently strode a very choleric gentleman. He wore a horsy check suit and white spats, and his tie closely resembled a stock. In his hand he carried a heavy malacca cane, gloves and one of those tall, light-gray hats commonly termed white. He was below medium height, slim and wiry; his gait and the shape of his legs, his build, all proclaimed the dragoon. His complexion was purple, and the large white teeth visible beneath a bristling gray mustache added to the natural ferocity of his appearance. Standing just within the doorway, "Mr. Paul Harley?" he shouted. It was apparently an inquiry, but it sounded like a reprimand.

My friend, standing before the fireplace, his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth, nodded brusquely. "I am Paul Harley," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

Maj. Ragstaff, glancing angrily at Brace as the latter left the study, tossed his stick and gloves on a settee and, drawing up a chair, seated himself stiffly upon it as though he were in a saddle. He stared straight at Harley. "You are not the sort of person I expected, sir," he declared. "May I ask if it is your custom to keep clients dancin' outside on the mat and all that—on the blasted mat, sir?"

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HARLEY suppressed a smile, and I hastily reached for my cigarette case, which I had placed upon the mantelshelf.

"I am always naturally pleased to see clients, Maj. Ragstaff," said Harley, "but a certain amount of routine is necessary even in civilian life. You had not advised me of your visit and it is contrary to my custom to discuss business after 5 o'clock."

As Harley spoke the major glared at him continuously. "I've seen you in India!" he roared; "damme! I've seen you in India—and, yes! in Turkey! Ha! I've got you now, sir!" He sprang to his feet. "You're the Harley who was in Constantinople in 1912."

"Quite true."

"Then I've come to the wrong shop."

"That remains to be seen, major."

"But I was told you were a private detective, and all that."

"So I am," said Harley quietly. "In 1912 the foreign office was my client. I am now at the service of any one who cares to employ me."

The major seemed to be temporarily stricken speechless by the discovery that a man who had acted for the British government should be capable of stooping to the work of a private inquiry agent. Staring all about the room with a sort of naive wonderment, he drew out a big silk handkerchief and loudly blew his nose, all the time eying Harley questioningly. Replacing his handkerchief, he directed his regard upon me.

"This is my friend, Mr. Knox," said Harley; "you may state your case before him without hesitation, unless——"

I rose to depart.

"Sit down, Mr. Knox; Sit down, sir!" shouted the major. "I have no skeletons in the cupboard. I simply want something explained which I am too thick-headed—too damned thick-headed, sir—to explain myself."

He resumed his seat and, taking out his wallet, extracted from it a small newspaper cutting, which he offered to Harley.

"Read that, Mr. Harley," he directed. "Read it aloud."

Harley obeyed and read as follows:

"Before Mr. Smith at Mariborough street police court John Edward Bampton was charged with assaulting a well known clubman in Bond street on Wednesday evening. It was proved by the constable who made the arrest that robbery had not been the motive of the assault and Bampton confessed that he bore no grudge against the assailed man; indeed, that he had never seen him before. He pleaded intoxication, and the police surgeon testified that, although not actually intoxicated, his breath had smelled strongly of liquor at the time of his arrest. Bampton's employers testified to a hitherto blameless character, and as the charge was not pressed the man was dismissed with a caution."

Having read the paragraph, Harley glanced at the major with a puzzled expression.

"The point of this quite escapes me," he confessed.

"Is that so?" said Maj. Ragstaff. "Is that so, sir? Perhaps you will be good enough to read this."

From his wallet he took a second newspaper cutting, smaller than the first, and gummed to a sheet of club note paper. Harley took it and read as follows:

"Mr. De Lana, a well known member of the stock exchange, who met with a serious accident recently, is still in a precarious condition."

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THE puzzled look on Harley's face grew more acute, and the major watched him with an expression which I can only describe as one of fierce enjoyment. "You're thinkin' I'm a damned old fool, ain't you?" he shouted, suddenly.

"Scarcely that," said Harley, smiling slightly, "but the significance of these paragraphs is not apparent, I must confess. The man Bampton would not appear to be an interesting character, and since no great damage has been done, his drunken frolic hardly comes within my sphere. Of Mr. De Lana of the stock exchange I never heard, unless he happens to be a member of the firm of De Lana & Day."

"He's not a member of that firm, sir!" shouted the major. "He was, up to 6 o'clock this evenin'."

"What do you mean exactly?" inquired Harley, and the tone of his voice suggested that he was beginning to entertain doubts of the major's sanity or sobriety.

"He's dead!" declared the major. "Dead as the Begum of Bangalore! He died at 6 o'clock. I've just spoken to his widow on the telephone."

I suppose I must have been staring very hard at the speaker, and certainly Harley was doing so, for he suddenly directed his fierce gaze toward me. "You're completely stumped, sir, and so's your friend!" shouted Maj. Ragstaff.

"I confess it," replied Harley, quietly; "and since my time is of some little value I would suggest, without disrespect, that you explain the connection, if any, between yourself, the drunken Bampton and Mr. De Lana of the stock exchange, who died, you inform us, at 6 o'clock this evening as the result, presumably, of injuries received in an accident."

"That's what I'm here for!" cried Maj. Ragstaff. "In the first place, then, I am the party, although I saw to it that my name was kept out of print, whom the drunken lunatic assaulted."

Harley, pipe in hand, stared at the speaker perplexedly.

"Understand me," continued the major, "I am the person—I, Jack Ragstaff—he assaulted. I was walking down from my quarters in Maddox street on my way to dine at the club, same as I do every night o' my life, when this flamin' idiot sprang upon me, grabbed my hat"—he took up his white hat to illustrate what had occurred—"not this one, but one like it—pitched it on the ground and jumped on it!"

Harley was quite unable to conceal his smiles as the excited old soldier dropped his conspicuous headgear on the floor and indulged in a vigorous pantomime designed to illustrate his statement.

"Most extraordinary," said Harley. "What did you do?"

"What did I do?" roared the major. "I gave him a crack on the head with my cane, and I said things to him which couldn't be repeated in court. I punched him, and likewise hoofed him, but the hat was completely done in. Damn crowd collected, hearin' me swearin' and bellowin'. Police and all that; names and addresses and all that balderdash. Man lugged away to guardroom and me turnin' up at the club with no hat. Damn ridiculous spectacle at my time o' life."

"Quite so," said Harley soothingly; "I appreciate your annoyance, but I am utterly at a loss to understand why you have come here and what all this has to do with Mr. De Lana of the stock exchange."

"He fell out of the window!" shouted the major.

"Fell out of a window?"

"Out of a window, sir, a second-floor window ten yards up a side street! Pitched on his skull—marvel he wastn't killed outright!"

A faint expression of interest began to creep into Harley's glance. "I understand you mean, Major Ragstaff," he said deliberately, "that while your struggle with the drunken man was in progress, Mr. De Lena fell out of a neighboring window into the street?"

"Right!" shouted the major. "Right, sir!"

"Do you know this Mr. De Lana?"

"Never heard of him in my life until the accident occurred. Seems to me the poor devil leaned out to see the fun and overbalanced. Felt responsible, only natural, and made inquiries. He died at 6 o'clock this evening, sir."

"H'm," said Harley reflectively. "I still fail to see where I come in. From what window did he fall?"

"Window above a sort of tea shop, called Cafe Dame—silly name. Place on a corner. Don't know name of side street."

"H'm. You don't think he was pushed out, for instance?"

"Certainly not!" shouted the major; "he just fell out, but the point is, he's dead!"

"My dear sir," said Harley patiently, "I don't dispute that point; but what on earth do you want of me?"

"I don't know what I want!" roared the major, beginning to walk up and down the room, "but I know I ain't satisfied, not easy in mind, sir. I wake up of a night hearin' the poor devil's yell as he crashed on the pavement. That's all wrong. I've heard hundreds of death yells, but"—he took up his malacca cane and beat it loudly on the table—"I haven't woke up of a night dreamin' I heard 'em again."

"In a word, you suspect foul play?"

"I don't suspect anything!" cried the other excitedly, "but some one mentioned your name to me at the club—said you could see through concrete and all that—and here I am. There's something wrong, radically wrong. Find out what it is and send the bill to me. Then perhaps I'll be able to sleep in peace."

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HE paused and, again taking out the large silk handkerchief, blew his nose loudly. Harley glanced at me in rather an odd way. "There will be no bill, Major Ragstaff," he said; "but if I can see any possible line of inquiry I will pursue it and report the result to you."

"What do you make of it, Harley?" I asked.

Paul Harley returned a work of reference to its shelf and stood staring absently across the study. "Our late visitor's history does not help us much," he replied. "A somewhat distinguished army career, and so forth, and his only daughter, Sibyl Margaret, married the fifth Marquis of Ireton. She is, therefore, the noted society beauty, the Marchioness of Ireton. Does this suggest anything to your mind?"

"Nothing whatever," I said blankly.

"Nor to mine," murmured Harley.

The telephone bell rang.

"Hullo!" called Harley. "Yes. That you, Wessex? Have you got the address? Good. No, I shall remember it. Many thinks. Good-bye."

He turned to me. "I suggest, Knox," he said, "that we make our call and then proceed to dinner as arranged."

Since I was always glad of an opportunity of studying my friend's methods, I immediately agreed, and before long, leaving the lights of the two big hotels behind, our car was gliding down the long slope which leads to Waterloo station. Thence through crowded, slummish highroads we made our way via Lambeth to that dismal thoroughfare, Westminster Bridge road, with its forbidding, often windowless houses, and its peculiar air of desolation.

The house for which we were bound was situated at no great distance from Kennington Park, and, telling the cabman to wait, Harley and I walked up a narrow, paved path, mounted a flight of steps and rang the bell beside a somewhat time-worn door, above which was an old-fashioned fanlight dimly illuminated from within.

A considerable interval elapsed before the door was opened by a marvelously untidy servant girl, who had apparently been interrupted in the act of blackleading her face. Partly opening the door, she stared at us agape, pushing back wisps of hair from her eyes, and with every movement daubing more of some mysterious black substance upon her countenance.

"Is Mr. Bampton in?" asked Harley.

"Yus, just come in. I'm cookin' his supper."

"Tell him that two friends of his have called on rather important business."

"All right," said the black-faced one. "What name is it?"

"No name. Just say two friends of his."

Treating us to a long, vacant stare and leaving us standing on the step, the maid (in whose hand I perceived a greasy fork) shuffled along the passage and began to mount the stairs. An unmistakable odor of frying sausages now reached my nostrils. Harley glanced at me quizzically, but said nothing until the Cinderella came stumbling downstairs again.

"Go up," she directed. "Second floor, front. Shut the door, one of yer."

She disappeared into gloomy depths below as Harley and I, closing the door behind us, proceeded to avail ourselves of the invitation. There was very little light upon the staircase, but we managed to find our way to a poorly furnished bedroom, where a small table was spread for a meal. Beside the table, in a chintz-covered armchair, a thick-set young man was seated smoking a cigarette, a copy of the Daily Telegraph upon his knee.

He was a very typical lower middle-class, nothing-in-particular young man, but there was a certain truculence indicated by his square jaw, and that sort of self-possession which sometimes accompanies physical strength was evidenced in his manner as, tossing the paper aside, he stood up.

"Good evening, Mr. Bampton," said Harley genially. "I take it"—pointing to the newspaper—"that you are looking for a new job?"

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BAMPTON stared, with a suspicion of anger in his eyes, then, meeting the amused glance of my friend, he broke into a smile very pleasing and humorous. He was a fresh-colored young fellow with hair inclined to redness, and smiling he looked very boyish indeed.

"I have no idea who you are," he said, speaking with a faint north-country accent, "but you evidently know who I am and what has happened to me."

"Got the boot?" asked Harley, confidentially.

Bampton, tossing the end of his cigarette into the grate, nodded grimly. "You haven't told me your name," he said, "but I think I can tell you your business." He ceased smiling. "Now, look here, I don't want any more publicity. If you think you are going to make a funny newspaper story out of me, change your mind as quick as you like. I'll never get another job in London as it is. If you drag me any farther into the limelight, I'll never get another job in England."

"My dear fellow," replied Harley, soothingly, at the same time extending his cigarette case, "you misapprehend the object of my call. I am not a reporter."

"What?" said Bampton, pausing in the act of taking a cigarette—"then what the devil are you?"

"My name is Paul Harley, and I am a criminal investigator."

He spoke the words deliberately, his eyes fixed upon the other's face; but, although Bampton was palpably startled, there was no trace of fear in his straightforward glance. He took a cigarette from the case. "Thanks, Mr. Harley," he said. "I cannot imagine what business has brought you here."

"I have come to ask you two questions," Harley answered. "No. 1: Who paid you to smash Maj. Ragstaff's white hat? No. 2: How much did he pay you?"

To these questions I listened in amazement, and my amazement was evidently shared by Bampton. He had been in the act of lighting his cigarette, but he allowed the match to burn down nearly to his fingers and then dropped it, with a muttered exclamation, in the fire. "I don't know how you found out," he said, "but you evidently know the truth. Provided you assure me that you are not out to make a silly-season newspaper story, I'll tell you all I know."

Harley laid his card on the table. "Unless the ends of justice demand it," he said, "I give you my word that anything you care to say will go no farther. You may speak freely before my friend, Mr. Knox. Simply tell me in as few words as possible what led you to court arrest in that manner."

"Right," replied Bampton, "I will." He half closed his eyes reflectively. "I was having tea in the Lyons Cafe, to which I always go, last Monday afternoon about 4 o'clock, when a man sat down facing me and got into conversation."

"Describe him!"

"He was a man rather above medium height. I should say about my own build; dark, going gray. He had a neat mustache and a short beard, and the look of a man who had traveled a lot. His skin was very tanned, almost as deeply as yours, Mr. Harley. Not at all the sort of chap that goes in there as a rule. After a while he made an extraordinary proposal. At first I thought he was joking, then when I grasped the idea that he was serious I concluded he was mad. He asked me how much a year I earned, and I told him Peters & Peters paid me £150. He said: 'I'll give you a year's salary to knock a man's hat off!'"

As Bampton spoke the words he glanced at us with twinkling eyes, but although for my own part I was merely amused, Harley's expression had grown very stern. "Of course, I laughed," continued Bampton, "but when the man drew out a fat wallet and counted ten five-pound notes on the table I began to think seriously about his proposal. Even supposing he was cracked it was absolutely money for nothing.

"'Of course,' he said, 'you'll lose your job, and you may be arrested, but you'll say that you had been out with a few friends and were a little excited, also that you never could stand white hats. Stick to that story, and the balance of a hundred pounds will reach you on the following morning.'

"I asked him for further particulars, and I asked him why he had picked me for the job. He replied that he had been looking for some time for the right man; a man who was strong enough physically to accomplish the thing, and some one"—Bampton's eyes twinkled again—"with a bit of dash in him, but at the same time a man who could be relied upon to stick to his guns and not to give the game away.

"You asked me to be brief and I'll try to be. The man in the white hat was described to me and the exact time and place of the meeting. I just had to grab his white hat, smash it and face the music. I agreed. I don't deny that I had a couple of stiff drinks before I set out, but the memory of that fifty pounds locked up here in my room, and the further hundred promised, bucked me up. It was impossible to mistake my man; I could see him coming toward me as I waited just outside a sort of little restaurant called the Cafe Dame. As arranged, I bumped into him, grabbed his hat and jumped on it."

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HE paused, raising his hand to his head reminiscently.

"My man was a bit of a scrapper," he continued. "I've never heard such language in my life, and the way he laid about me with his cane is something I am not likely to forget in a hurry. A crowd gathered, naturally, and I was pinched. That didn't matter much. I got off lightly; and although I've been dismissed by Peters & Peters, twenty crisp fivers are locked in my trunk there, with the ten which I received in the city."

Harley checked him. "May I see the envelope in which this money arrived?" he asked.

"Sorry," replied Bampton, "but I burned it. I thought it was playing the game to do so. It wouldn't have helped you much, though," he added; "it was an ordinary common envelope, posted in the city, address typewritten, and not a line inclosed.

"Registered?"

"No."

Bampton stood looking at us with a curious expression on his face. "There's one point," he said, "on which my conscience isn't easy. You know about that poor devil who fell out of a window? Well, it would never have happened if I hadn't kicked up a row in the street. There's no doubt he was leaning out to see what the disturbance was about when the accident occurred."

"Did you actually see him fall?" asked Harley.

"No. He fell from a window several yards behind me in the side street, but I heard him cry out, and as I was lugged off by the police I heard the bell of the ambulance which came to fetch him."

"THEN WHY SHOULD HE EVER KNOW?" SHE WHISPERED.

He paused again and stood rubbing his head ruefully.

"H'h," said Harley; "was there anything particularly remarkable about this man in the Lyons Cafe?"

Bampton reflected silently for some moments. "Nothing much," he confessed. "He was evidently a gentleman, wore a blue topcoat, a dark tweed suit, and what looked like a regimental tie, but I didn't know the colors. He was very tanned, as I have said, even to the backs of his hands—and, oh, yes, there was one point; he had a gold-covered tooth."

"Which tooth?"

"I can't remember, except that it was on the left side, and I always noticed it when he smiled."

"Did he wear any ring or pin which you would recognize?"

"No."

"Was there anything queer in his speech or voice?"

"No. He spoke like thousands of other Englishmen."

Harley nodded briskly and buttoned up his overcoat. "Thanks, Mr. Bampton," he said; "we will detain you no longer."

As we descended the stairs, where the smell of frying sausages had given place to that of something burning—probably the sausages—Harley said: "I was half inclined to think that Maj. Ragstaff's ideas were traceable to a former touch of the sun. I begin to believe that he has put us on the track of a pretty unusual crime. I am sorry to delay dinner, Knox, but I propose to call at the Cafe Dame."

On entering the doorway of the Cafe Dame we found ourselves in a narrow passage. In front of us was a carpeted stair and to the right a glass-paneled door communicating with a discreetly lighted little dining room, which seemed to be well patronized. Opening the door, Harley beckoned to a waiter. "I wish to see the proprietor," he said.

"Mr. Meyer is engaged at the moment, sir," he answered.

"Where is he?"

"In his office upstairs, sir. He will be down in a moment."

The waiter hurried away, and Harley stood glancing up the stairs as if in doubt what to do.

"I can't imagine how such a place can pay," he muttered. "The rent must be enormous in this district."

But even before he ceased speaking I became aware of an excited conversation which was taking placing in some apartment above.

"It's scandalous!" I heard, in a woman's shrill voice. "You have no right to keep it! It's not your property, and I'm here to demand that you give it up."

A man's voice replied in voluble broken English, but I could only distinguish a word here and there. I saw that Harley was interested, for, catching my questioning glance, he raised his finger to his lips, enjoining me to be silent.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" continued the female voice. "Of course, you know it's blackmail?"

A flow of unintelligible words answered this speech.

"I shall come back with some one," cried the woman, "who will make you give it up!"

"Knox," whispered Harley in my ear, "when this woman comes down, follow her! I'm afraid you will bungle the business, and I would not ask you to attempt it if big things were not at stake. Come back here: I shall wait."

As a matter of fact, his sudden request had positively astounded me, but before I had time for any reply a door suddenly banged open above and a respectable-looking woman, who might have been some kind of upper servant, came quickly down the stairs. Without seeming to notice our presence, she brushed past us and went out into the street.

"Off you go, Knox!" said Harley.

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SEEING myself committed to an unpleasant business, I slipped out of the doorway and saw the woman five or six yards away hurrying in the direction of Piccadilly. I had no difficulty in following her, for she was evidently unsuspicious of my presence, and when presently she mounted a westward-bound bus I did likewise. Though she found a seat inside, I went on top, and occupied a place on the near side where I could observe any one leaving the vehicle.

At Hyde Park corner I saw the woman descending, and when presently she walked up Hamilton place I was not far behind her. At the door of an imposing mansion she stopped, and in response to a ring of the bell the door was opened by a footman and the woman hurried in. Evidently she was an inmate of the establishment; and conceiving that my duty was done when I had noted the number of the house, I retraced my steps to the corner and, hailing a taxicab, returned to the Cafe Dame. I inquired of the same waiter whom Harley had accosted whether my friend was there.

"I think a gentleman is upstairs with Mr. Meyer," said the man.

"In his office?"

"Yes, sir."

I mounted the stairs and before a half-open door paused. Harley's voice was audible within, so I knocked and entered. I discovered Harley standing by an American desk. Beside him, in a revolving chair which, with the desk, constituted the principal furniture of a tiny office, sat a man in a dress suit which had palpably not been made for him. He had a sullen and suspiciously Teutonic cast of countenance, and he was engaged in a voluble but hardly intelligible speech as I entered.

"Ha, Knox!" said Harley, glancing over his shoulder, "did you manage?"

"Yes," I replied.

Harley nodded shortly and turned again to the man in the chair.

"I am sorry to give you so much trouble, Mr. Meyer," he said, "but I should like my friend here to see the room above."

At this moment my attention was attracted by a singular object which lay upon the desk in a litter of bills and accounts. This was a piece of rusty iron bar, somewhat less than three feet in length, that once had been painted green.

"You are looking at this tragic fragment, Knox," said Harley, taking up the bar. "Of course"—he shrugged his shoulders—"it explains the whole unfortunate occurrence. You see, there was a flaw in the metal at this end here"—he indicated the spot—"and the other end had evidently worn loose in its socket."

"But I don't understand."

"It will all be made clear at the inquest, no doubt. A most unfortunate thing for you, Mr. Meyer."

"Most unfortunate," declared the proprietor of the restaurant, extending his thick hands pathetically. "Most ruinous to my business."

"We'll go upstairs now," said Harley. "You will kindly lead the way, Mr. Meyer, and the whole thing will be quite clear to you, Knox."

As the proprietor walked out of the office and upstairs to the second floor Harley whispered in my ear: "Where did she go?"

"No. 45 Hamilton place," I replied in an undertone.

"Good God!" muttered my friend and clutched my arm so tightly that I winced. "Good God! This crime was the work of a genius."

Opening a door on the second landing, Mr. Meyer admitted us to a small supper room. Its furniture consisted of a round dining table, several chairs, a couch and very little else. I observed, however, that the furniture, carpet and a few other appointments were of a character much more elegant than those of the public room below. A window which overlooked the street was open, so that the plush curtains which had been drawn aside moved slightly in the draft.

"The window of the tragedy, Knox," explained Harley. He crossed the room. "If you will stand here beside me you will see the gap in the railing caused by the breaking away of the fragment which now lies on Mr. Meyer's desk. Some few yards to the left in the street below is where the assault took place of which we have heard, and the unfortunate Mr. De Lana, who was dining here alone—an eccentric custom of his—naturally ran to the window upon hearing the disturbance, leaned out, supporting his weight upon the railing. The rail collapsed, and—we know the rest."

"It will ruin me," groaned Meyer; "it will give bad repute to my establishment."

"I fear it will," agreed Harley, sympathetically, "unless we can manage to clear up one or two little difficulties which I have observed. For instance"—he tapped the proprietor on the shoulder confidentially—"have you any idea, any hazy idea, of the identity of the woman who was dining here with Mr. De Lana on Wednesday night?"

The effect of this simple inquiry upon the proprietor was phenomenal. His fat, yellow face assumed a sort of leaden hue, and his already prominent eyes protruded abnormally. He licked his lips.

"I tell you—already I tell you," he muttered, "that Mr. De Lana he engage this room every Wednesday and sometimes also Friday, and dine here by himself."

"And I tell you," said Harley, sweetly, "that you are an inspired liar. You smuggled her out by the side entrance after the accident."

"The side entrance?" muttered Meyer. "The side entrance?"

"Exactly: the side entrance. There is something else which I must ask you to tell me. Who had engaged this room on Tuesday night, the night before the accident?"

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THE proprietor's expression remained uncomprehending. "A gentleman," he said. "I never see him before."

"Another solitary diner?" suggested Harley.

"Yes, he is alone all the evening waiting for a friend who does not come."

"Ah," mused Harley—"alone all the evening, was he? And his friend disappointed him. May I suggest that he was a dark man? Gray at the temples, having a dark beard and mustache, and a very tanned face?"

"Yes! yes!" cried Meyer, and his astonishment was patently unfeigned. "It is a friend of yours?"

"A friend of mine, yes," said Harley absently, but his expression was very grim. "What time did he finally leave?"

"He waited until after 11 o'clock. The dinner is spoiled. He pays, but does not complain."

"No," said Harley musingly, "he had nothing to complain about. One more question, my friend. When the lady escaped hurriedly on Wednesday night, what was it that she left behind and what price are you trying to extort from her for returning it?"

At that the man collapsed entirely.

"Ach, Gott!" he cried, and raised his hand to his clammy forehead. "You will ruin me. I am a ruined man. I don't try to extort anything. I run an honest business——"

"And a profitable one," added Harley. "Even at Bond Street rentals I assume that this house is a golden enterprise."

"Ah!" groaned Meyer, "I am ruined, so what does it matter. I tell you everything. I know Mr. De Lana, who engages my room regularly, but I don't know who the lady is who meets him here. No! I swear it! But always it is the same lady. When he falls I am downstairs in my office and I hear him cry out. The lady comes running from the room and begs of me to get her away without being seen and to keep all mention of her out of the matter."

"What did she pay you?" asked Harley.

"Pay me?" muttered Meyer, pulling up shortly in the midst of his statement.

"Pay you. Exactly. Don't argue; answer."

"She promised me one hundred pounds," he confessed hoarsely.

"But you surely did not accept a mere promise? Out with it. What did she give you?"

"A ring," came the confession at last.

"A ring. I see. I will take it with me if you don't mind. And now finally what was it that she left behind?"

"Ach, Gott!" moaned the man, dropping into a chair and resting his arms upon the table. "It is all a great panic, you see. I hurry her out by the back stair from the landing and she forgets her bag."

"Her bag? Good."

"Then I clear away the remains of dinner so I can say Mr. De Lana is dining alone. It is as much my interest as the lady's."

"Of course! I quite understand. I will trouble you no more, Mr. Meyer, except to step into your office and to relieve you of that incriminating evidence, the lady's bag and her ring."

"Do you understand, Knox?" said Harley as the cab bore us toward Hamilton place. "Do you grasp the details of this scheme?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "I am absolutely at sea."

Nevertheless I had forgotten that I was hungry, in the excitement which now claimed me. For, although the thread upon which these seemingly disconnected things hung was invisible to me, I recognized that Bampton, the city clerk, the bearded stranger who had made so singular a proposition to him, the white-hatted major, the dead stockbroker, and the mysterious woman whose presence in the case the clear sight of Harley had promptly detected, all were linked together by some subtle chain. I was convinced, too, that my friend held at least one end of that chain in his grasp.

"In order to prepare your mind for the interview which I hope to obtain this evening," continued Harley, "let me clear up one or two points which may seem obscure. In the first place, you recognize that any one leaning out of that window on the second floor would almost automatically rest his weight upon the iron bar which was placed there for that very purpose, since the ledge is unusually low?"

"Quite," I replied, "and it also follows that if the bar gave way any one thus leaning on it would be pitched into the street."

"Correct."

"But, my dear fellow," said I "how could such an accident have been foreseen?"

"You speak of an accident. This was no accident! One end of the bar had been filed completely through, although the file marks had been carefully concealed with rust and dirt, and the other end had been wrenched out from its socket and then replaced in such a way that any one leaning upon the bar could not fail to be precipitated into the street."

"Good heavens! Then you mean——"

"I mean Knox, that the man who occupied the supper room on the night before the tragedy—the dark man, tanned and bearded—spent his time in filing through that bar—in short, in preparing a death trap!"

I was almost dumfounded. "But, Harley," I said, "assuming that he knew his victim would be the next occupuant of the room, how could he know——"

* * * *

I STOPPED. Suddenly, as if a curtain had been raised, the details of what I now perceived to be a fiendishly cunning murder were revealed to me.

"According to his own account, Knox," said Harley, "Maj. Ragstaff regularly passed along that street with military punctuality at the same hour every night. You may take it for granted that the murderer was well aware of this. As a matter of fact, I happen to know that he was. We must also take it for granted that the murderer knew of these little dinners for two which took place in the private room above the Cafe Dame every Wednesday—and sometimes on Friday. Around the figure of the methodical major—with his conspicuous white hat as a sort of focus—was built up one of the most ingenious schemes of murder with which I have ever come in contact. The victim literally killed himself."

"But, Harley, the victim might have ignored the disturbance."

"That is where I first detected the touch of genius, Knox. He recognized the voice of one of the combatants—or his companion did. Here we are."

The cab drew up before the house in Hamilton place. We alighted and Harley pressed the bell. The same footman whom I had seen admit the woman opened the door.

"Is Lady Ireton at home?" asked Harley.

As he uttered the name I literally held my breath. We had come to the house of Maj. Ragstaff's daughter, the Marchioness of Ireton, one of society's most celebrated and beautiful hostesses—the wife of a peer famed alike as sportsman, soldier and scholar.

"I believe she is dining at home, sir," said the man. "Shall I inquire?"

"Be good enough to do so," replied Harley, and gave him a card. "Inform her that I wish to return to her a handbag which she lost a few days ago."

The man ushered us into an anteroom off the lofty and rather gloomy hall and closed the door.

"Harley," I said in a stage whisper, "am I to believe——"

"Can you doubt it?" returned Harley, with a grim smile.

A few moments later we were shown into a charmingly intimate little boudoir, in which Lady Ireton was waiting to receive us. She was a strikingly handsome brunette, but tonight her face, which normally, I think, possessed rich coloring, was almost pallid, and there was a hunted look in her dark eyes which made me wish to be anywhere rather than where I found myself.

"I fail to understand your message, sir," she said, and I admired the imperious courage with which she faced him. "You say you have recovered a handbag which I had lost?"

Harley bowed, and from the pocket of his greatcoat took out a silken tasseled bag. "The one which you left in the Cafe Dame, Lady Ireton," he replied. "Here also I have"—from another pocket he drew out a diamond ring—"something which was extorted from you by the fellow, Meyer."

Without touching her recovered property, Lady Ireton stood beside the chair from which she had arisen, her gaze fixed as if hypnotically upon the speaker.

"My friend, Mr. Knox, is aware of all the circumstances," continued the latter, "but he is as anxious as I am to terminate this painful interview. I surmise that what occurred on Wednesday night was this—correct me if I am wrong: While dining with Mr. De Lana you heard sounds of a quarrel in the street below. May I suggest that you recognized one of the voices?"

* * * *

LADY IRETON, still staring straight before her at Harley, inclined her head in assent. "I heard my father's voice," she said hoarsely.

"Quite so," he continued. "I am aware that Maj. Ragstaff is your father." He turned to me: "Do you recognize the touch of genius at last?" Then, again, addressing Lady Ireton: "You naturally suggested to your companion that he should look out of the window in order to learn what was taking place. The next thing you knew was that he had fallen into the street?"

Lady Ireton shuddered and raised her hands to her face. "It is retribution," she whispered. "I have brought this on myself. But he does not deserve——" Her voice faded into silence.

"You refer to your husband, Lord Ireton?" said Harley.

Lady Ireton nodded and, again recovering power of speech: "It was to have been our last meeting," she said, looking up at Harley. She shuddered and her eyes blazed into sudden fierceness. Then, clenching her hands, she looked aside. "Oh, the shame of this hour!" she whispered.

And I would have given much to have been spared the spectacle of this proud woman's humiliation. But Paul Harley was scientifically remorseless. I could detect no pity in his glance.

"I would give my life willingly to spare my husband the knowledge of what has happened," said Lady Ireton in a low, monotonous voice. "Three times I sent my maid to Meyer to recover my bag, but he demanded a price which even I could not pay. Now it is all discovered, and Harry will know."

"That, I fear, is unavoidable, Lady Ireton," declared Harley. "May I ask where Lord Ireton is at present?"

"He is in Africa after big game."

"H'm," said Harley, "in Africa, and after big game! I can offer you one consolation, Lady Ireton. In his own interests Meyer will stick to his first assertion that Mr. De Lana was dining alone."

A strange, horribly pathetic look came into the woman's haunted eyes. "You—you—are not acting for?" she began.

"I am acting for no one," replied Harley tersely. "Upon my friend's discretion you may rely as upon my own."

"Then why should he ever know?" she whispered.

"Why, indeed," murmured Harley, "since he is in Africa?"

* * * *

AS we descended the stair to the hall my friend paused and pointed to a life-size oil painting by London's most fashionable portrait painter. It was that of a man in the uniform of a guards officer, a dark man, slightly gray at the temples, his face very tanned as if by exposure to the sun.

"Having had no occasion for disguise when the portrait was painted," said Harley, "Lord Ireton appears here without the beard; and as he is not represented smiling one cannot see the gold tooth!"

"But, Harley—it was murder!"

"Not within the meaning of the law, Knox. Lord Ireton is officially in Africa—and he went actually after 'big game.' The counsel is not born who could secure a conviction. We are somewhat late, but shall have less difficulty in finding a table at Princes."

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Indian Names of Rivers and Creeks

PERSONS living in the Potomac valley, or for that matter in the valleys of most American rivers, have become so familiar with Indian names that they never stop to consider the charm and oddity of those names. In the Potomac region, some of these names have a jerky and disordered look in print, but if spoken by a person who pronounces his English well, the old words have a tuneful sound. There is a note, perhaps several notes, of wild music in them. In the names of Maryland and Virginia rivers and creeks, the memory of Indian times in this part of the country is preserved. The spelling of these names by the whites has been various, but it is clear that the names of these places, as spoken by the Indian sounded to the European settlers very like those expressed by the letters with which we have come to spell them.

Near Washington is Dogue creek, which runs through the Mount Vernon lands and on which creek George Washington's mill and his miller's house stood. There is Accotink creek, which also flows through the Mount Vernon lands, especially through that part of the Mount Vernon estate which was sold by Lorenzo Lewis, son of Nellie Custis Lewis, and which about 1850 came to be settled by members of the Society of Friends from New Jersey. Then, there is Accotink bay, which is the wide mouth of the creek at its junction with the Potomac. Close by Accotink are Pohick creek, Pohick bay and Pohick Church which was the church of the Washingtons of Mount Vernon, the Fairfaxes of Belvoir, the Masons of Gunston Hall, and many other good, or ordinary, proud or plain people of that historic neighborhood.

A little below Pohick bay, which helps to form Gunston cove, is Occoquan creek and its bay, which is called Occoquan bay. Somewhere on the shores of this bay, it is believed, if indeed it has not been proved to the satisfaction of historical scholars, there was a Jesuit mission, nearly a century before the coming of Europeans to the Chesapeake bay and the James river and the founding of Jamestown. Into Occoquan creek, Bull run, a stream made memorable in the American civil war, flows.

Below Occoquan and flowing through Prince William and Stafford counties into the Potomac river are the creeks Marumsco, Neabsco, Quantico—on which ruins of the early city of Dumfries lie—and Chappawamsic. Chappawamsic is also the name of the large and difficult swamps in the vicinity of Washington, and not so far away, on the other side of the river in Maryland, is the extensive swamp called Zakiah, also an Indian name.

Aquia creek is another of the Indian-named waterways, and so is Accokeek creek, Va., which flows into Potomac creek, which flows into the Potomac river, and at the junction of Potomac creek and Potomac river is the site of "the town of the Potowmacke," which John Smith and his fellow explorers of the Potomac country marked down on their map in 1608.

Below Washington, in King George county, is Passapatansy creek and another creek called Dogue, which empties into the Rappanhannock river. There is Motomkin point, which is above Mathias point, and close by is Machodoc creek. Not far away are Occupacia creek, the Marrieccosick and the Mattapony rivers. Further down the Potome on the Virginia side are the Pedee, Curriomen, Nomini and Yeocomico creeks or rivers and King Copsico point.

Flowing into the Potomac from the lands of Maryland are the creeks, wide as rivers, and sometimes called rivers, Accokeek, Famunkey, Mattawoman, Chickomuxen, the Nanjemoy and the river Wicomico.

"HE'S DEAD!" DECLARED MAJ. RAGSTAFF. "DEAD AS THE BEGUM OF BANGALORE! HE DIED AT 6 O'CLOCK."